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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5347
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0180
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9866
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 6809
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4879
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3507
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0590
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3599
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2676
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 0321
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1776
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000229

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION LEADER SAYS PROGRESS ON
PEACE POSSIBLE DESPITE BREAKDOWN OF MOU

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met with Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the major opposition United National Party (UNP), on February 5, soon after 18 UNP parliamentarians joined the government to accept ministerial posts (ref). Wickremesinghe said he would not attempt to expel the "crossovers" from the UNP and would leave an "open door" in case any in his party wanted to return. He said the MoU between the UNP and the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party is defunct because the president reneged on its terms by offering ministries to UNP defectors. He reiterated this in an address to parliament on February 6. Nevertheless, Wickremesinghe said, the UNP may still continue to engage in the All-Party Conference (APC) to resolve the ethnic conflict. Wickremesinghe reported that when he met with Indian leadership on a recent trip to New Delhi, they said they are urging the Sri Lankan government to accelerate work on a plan for devolution -- a position with which he agreed. He added the UNP would support the government in parliament on any devolution proposal consistent with the UNP-SLFP annex to the MoU on the conflict, including provisions for a national referendum on the final agreement. End summary.

PARTY LEADER CONFIDENT

UNP WILL REMAIN STRONG, INTACT...

12. (C) The Ambassador met with the principal opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on February 5, shortly after 18 UNP members crossed over to the government to accept ministerial posts. Wickremesinghe said the party will take "disciplinary measures" against the crossovers, but would not attempt to expel them from the UNP. The new ministers will not be permitted to sit on UNP decision-making committees, but may nominally remain members of the party, Wickremesinghe said. He added that he wants to leave an "open door" if anyone wishes to return fully to the UNP, assessing that some crossovers were not happy with their decision to join government ranks.

13. (C) The Ambassador asked Wickremesinghe about the future of the UNP, noting that if seven more UNP members joined the government, the UNP number in parliament would fall below that of the Marxist, Sinhalese chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP would then likely make a bid for the title of chief opposition party. Wickremesinghe said, "We'll see what happens," and expressed confidence the UNP would remain the largest opposition party. He denied press reports that six more UNP members would soon cross over to the government and assured the Ambassador he could staunch the bleeding in his party. He reported that he had agreed to implement some of the reforms the crossover group had been requesting.

... THOUGH PARTY RIFTS CONTINUE

14. (C) Despite Wickremesinghe's confidence his party will recover, many in the UNP remain skeptical about his leadership. In a separate discussion with the Ambassador on February 5, Sajith Premadasa, son of the assassinated UNP President Ranasinghe Premadasa and himself a UNP MP since 2000, said dissatisfaction with Wickremesinghe ran deep in the UNP. According to Premadasa, many of those who had not crossed over nevertheless felt that Wickremesinghe had used the MoU with Rajapaksa for his own, party-internal purposes. He had negotiated away several potential advantages, including offering blanket support for the government on the budget -- thereby abdicating the role of active opposition -- while receiving little in return. Premadasa noted that Ranil had not, for example, extracted any concessions on power sharing or ministerial posts, on improved observance of human

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rights, or on bringing the government into compliance with the 17th amendment, which provides for a number of checks on executive power. Instead, Wickremesinghe had negotiated with the government on his own with the transparent aim of preventing UNP crossovers.

PROGRESS ON PEACE
STILL POSSIBLE

15. (C) Wickremesinghe posited that President Rajapaksa is "not serious about peace" and predicted further government military moves in the north. He accused the president of alienating many within his own SLFP, as well as the majority of the UNP and most within the JVP. He believed that the president would aim for a series of military victories, then call early parliamentary elections to cement his anticipated popularity gains.

16. (C) Wickremesinghe reported that on a recent trip to New Delhi, the Indian leadership told him they were pressing the Sri Lankan government to produce a devolution proposal by then end of February. Wickremesinghe said the UNP working group would decide whether to continue working with the All-Party Congress (APC) on the ethnic conflict. In any case, he assured Ambassador, the UNP will support the government in parliament on any devolution proposal that is consistent with the tenets of the Tokyo Declaration and the annex to the SLFP-UNP MoU covering the conflict, and permits a national referendum on the final agreement.

17. (U) In a speech to parliament February 6, Wickremesinghe blamed the president for undermining the MoU between the SLFP and UNP by accepting crossovers, and he said this act rendered the MoU void. He regretted the missed chance at cooperation between the two major parties, saying, "A golden opportunity to change the course of history, and indeed our country's destiny, has been lost." Nevertheless, he told Parliament, the UNP will support the government if it produces a devolution proposal to resolve the ethnic conflict in line with UNP recommendations to the APC.

18. (C) COMMENT: Wickremesinghe's control over the UNP appears increasingly uncertain. Even his loyalists are upset that his negotiations with the government forced UNP support for the budget, and in the end, failed to prevent UNP defections to the government. His conjectures about the president's plans are likely tinged with anger that Rajapaksa, once again, has outmaneuvered him. Despite the rifts within the UNP, Wickremesinghe is almost certainly correct that most in his party will support a viable devolution proposal. His own comments to the parliament indicate as much. The question remains, however, whether the opposition retains enough clout to insist on amendments if the government's devolution proposal turns out to be too watered-down to form the basis for negotiations. We will continue to urge the UNP to engage in the all-party process and to cooperate across the political divide on a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict.

BLAKE